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Striving toward omniscience

By Lewis H. Lapham

Following the news that an American family of espionage agents had been routinely selling secrets to the Soviet Union for 18 years, almost everybody in Washington who claims to be anybody released thunderous statements to the press about the need to get a firmer grip on the national security. Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense, even has called for the execution of those found guilty of spying during peacetime.

The official alarm strikes me as excessive, and I suspect that the military secret has become as obsolete a weapon of war as the crossbow. Consider the tonnage of secrets lugged across international frontiers during the last 40 years. Legions of agents working two or three sides of every rumor have copied, transcribed, edited, collated and sold enough information to take up all the space on all the shelves in the Library of Congress.

And what has been the result of this immense labor? How has the exchange of classified news impinged, even slightly, on the course of events? When pressed by questions they would rather not answer, the gentlemen in Washington invariably make some kind of specious case for the incalculable significance of a particular scrap of paper.

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But the knowledge of what secret could have prevented the United States from blundering into Vietnam?

The acquisition or loss of what secret could prevent the United States from building its arsenal of nuclear weapons as necessary to the American economy as to the American theory of reality?

The history of the world's wars suggests that the fateful decisions have little or nothing to do with facts, whether overt or covert. They arise instead from passionate illusions.

The media like to say that governments without perfect knowledge of other governments take actions that otherise they might not have taken—with grave, far-reaching, ironic consequences. Precisely the same observation holds true for any government or individual at any point in time under any set of circumstances.

Only people fool enough to play at being gods imagine that they can obtain an impregnable state of omniscience. Malcolm Muggeridge made the point in his memoirs.

"Secrecy," Muggeridge observed, "is as essential to intelligence as vestments and incense to a mass, as darkness to a spiritualist seance, and must at all costs be preserved whether or not it serves any purpose. . . ."

Muggeridge remembered that Kim Philby, the notorious double agent, sent his wife love notes on tiny fragments of tissue paper that could be easily swallowed in the interests of security. John Walker appears to have operated under the cover of an analogous fantasy.

During the period of his service for the KGB, Walker also belonged to the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. All three organizations place as much emphasis on secrecy as do Weinberger and the curators of the Pentagon who believe that by administering lie detector tests and limiting security clearances to a mere 2 million people they can lock the vagaries of human nature safely in a file cabinet.

Of the 19,607,736 new documents the federal government last year classified as secret, it's probably safe to assume that the majority were granted their honorary status for one of two reasons: to conceal stupidity, irrelevance or chicanery from the embarrassment of disclosure to the American public; or to make the documents more precious, perhaps sacred, thus adding to the store of religious amulets with which to ward off the corruption of the unclassified world and the malevolence of the evil eye set in the head of an evil empire.